

THE WINDOWS WERE open on that sweltering Fourth of July in 1937: the day my father walked out of my life forever.

Mother, my brother, Ralph, and I waited all morning for Father to come home from the shop so we could go to Coney Island. When he finally stumbled through the door in mid-afternoon, he reeked of alcohol and smoke. I was fourteen and while my father was often sad and angry by then, I had never seen him drunk before.

Until the depression, most of the neighborhood families and stores brought their clothing to Father's tailor shop for mending and tailoring. Each morning he wheeled his clothing rack from the shop filled with beautifully tailored clothes wrapped in cellophane. The sun and wind playing with the plastic made it sparkle like ripples on a pond. To me, Father, tall and trim, looked like a movie star in his finely tailored suit, polished leather shoes and wide brimmed hat. By noon, he visited each of clothing stores on Atlantic Avenue and Fulton Street and returned with his rack filled with pinned and wax-marked garments. When he didn't have too many stops to make, he would let me walk with him. Even better, he would sometimes say, "My Lady, your carriage awaits," and would invite me sit on the bottom shelf of the clothing rack as he wheeled me through the streets.

On the tree-lined Brooklyn side streets, many of the people sitting on their stoops greeted father with, "Good morning, Mr. Bower," and "How do you do, Mr. Bower."

Father returned with, "And to you," and "Fine, thank you. Have a nice day."

Occasionally someone would ask, "And how is the lovely Miss Maureen this morning?"

I was painfully shy so Father would look down at me, smile and reply for me, "Lovely as always." He ended by waving his hand or even better, by tipping his hat just slightly.

"Daddy," I said, "it's like you are the mayor or something," but he quickly corrected me.

“Not at all, my Lady. You are my princess and I am your humble servant.”

Stores like the A&P, the bakery, and my favorite, the ice cream parlor, lined both sides of Atlantic Avenue, which we always had to cross quickly. Four lanes of cars sprang forward like racehorses coming out of the gate as soon as the lights turned green. They rushed to pass as many of the streetlights as possible before they turned red again. Meanwhile, women coming out of the A&P wheeled their shopping baskets past the butcher shop and the men smoking out front in their bloodstained aprons.

The biggest clothing stores were also on Atlantic Avenue. Father took a few of the plastic wrapped items from his rack into each store and exchanged them for others that were pinned and marked with wax. All of the clothing storeowners looked alike to me. Each of them wore baggy pants, a button down shirt with a collar and a vest. A bar of white marking wax peeked out of the vest pocket and a cloth measuring tape with pins in it hung around their necks. They all spoke with a funny but nice sounding accent.

The smaller clothing stores and my father’s tailor shop were on Fulton Street. The elevated train overhead kept the street constantly shadowed. Most of the people living in the third and fourth-floor apartments kept their curtains closed because you could see right inside from the train cars.

The corner candy store was just across the street from the tailor-shop and every evening Ralph and I eagerly waited to see what new delights Father bought for us.

“For my princess,” father said as he held up my treat like a prized trophy. It didn’t matter what it was. The way he presented it always made me feel special. On weekdays, after school, he and I sometimes walked together to Highland Park. When I was younger, he sat patiently as I played on the swings or monkey bars. As I grew older, I played less and we talked more. We

often sat beneath the shade of the tall maple trees at the highest point in the park. From there, we talked for hours and viewed the park and the busy city below. Father said, "It's so much easier to see things clearly from up here." In time, that spot became my favorite place to think, to enjoy the view, and to ponder what the future might hold.

On Saturday nights, Father, tall and trim in his finely tailored suit and Mother, slender and beautiful in her long, flowing dress, walked arm-in-arm to the church dances. Life felt like a fairytale; then everything changed.